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The Significance of Oriental Art

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THE "influence" of Oriental art on modern Western art is a potent fact and may be detected alike in painting and sculpture, music, dancing, costume and handicraft. This influence has been, for the most part, pernicious—little more significant than the imitation of mannerisms in response to a demand for the exotic, quaint, and mysterious. For those for whom the actual East is too strong meat, the quasi-Oriental draperies and pseudo-Oriental dance and the "Chinoiseries" of a few painters have provided—a new sensation.

Those who look upon the East as mysterious and romantic have only themselves to thank for the creation of a novel unreality. What is romantic and mysterious to a foreigner is classic and self-evident to a native; and no one can be said to understand the art of the East or any other art so long as it remains to him a curiosity—only when he sees that it must have been as it is, does he begin to understand. He will see then that it does not represent a fine accomplishment or something undertaken for fun, but expresses an entire mentality and racial inheritance. Through it he may learn the better to understand the unfamiliar faith, but how can he through its formulae express *himself*, or "stand in his own place in his own day here?"

If Oriental art as a complete and fixed expression—in truth, a dead language, having received its last and mortal wounds at the hands of Western industrialism and diplomacy—has no more value for the artist than for other men, however great this common importance (as expressing the heart and mind of the East) may be, we may proceed to ask what particular significance the late "discovery of Asia" may have for Western artists. Here we come at once upon the solid ground

of Asiatic psychology and criticism: for the East is able to remind us of many things that are important in the genesis of art. It is rather the teacher of art and art appreciation, than the practising artist, who should study Oriental art—the latter, should he even visit the Orient in person, will find the living man more marvellous than any ancient monument.

“The forms of images,” says Sukracharya, an Indian critic, “are determined by the relation that subsists between adorer and adored.” Although in theological language, this is a perfectly general statement of how it is that a work of art assumes just that particular form it comes to have: the adorer is the artist, the adored is the theme, the image is the work of art. Without a relation of necessity between the artist and his theme, there is nothing to express, and consequently, the result cannot be a work of art. No genuine form can be created without there having been profound reasons for its existence: style is determined by what we have to say and not by arbitrary or fanciful choice. I do not condescend to discuss the opportunity that still remains for illustration. In the common case the artist has nothing to say; I take it for granted that the distinction between illustration and expression needs no emphasis.

The essential problem of the artist is to see or hear the form of his intuition sufficiently clearly: as Blake expresses it, “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light, than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all!” In genuine art, whether visionary or realistic, there is nothing vague or indefinite—“the want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the idea of want in the artist’s mind, and the pretence of plagiary in all its branches.” In Western schools of art the teaching is directed solely to the acquisition of manual skill, and yet we all know that the art of a modern, while it is not necessarily inferior to that of a Giotto, is not necessarily superior merely because of the knowledge of perspective and anatomy it reveals. No manual dexterity or analytical knowledge can compensate for

the original deficiency of visualization. And it is precisely in the cultivation of this power—partly as the result of the practise of drawing always from stored memories rather than from still life (the posed model, from this point of view, is but little superior to the plaster cast), but still more from the regular practise of visualization, alike in the private practise of religion and in the artist's preparation for any work he may undertake—that the East, and particularly India, has something of importance for Western artists. To put the idea very simply, the true work of creation must be completed before the brush or pen is put to paper; and what is of most importance from every point of view is the reality of the original creation. If this is to be vital, the artist must be preoccupied, saturated with, or, as we should say in India, identified with, his subject; and if not so it will not be worth while for him to take up his tools. In schools of art, from the very beginning, at least as much time should be devoted to drawing from imagination or memory as to studying forms objectively present. At present, almost all children possess a greater or less degree of creative imagination, which is destroyed as soon as they are taught that it is more important to draw accurately than to draw expressively. The training in accuracy, however necessary, should be patently subordinated to the cultivation of imagination (I speak, let me say again, always of art, and not of illustration). Moreover, the meaning of "accuracy" for an artist should be carefully explained: Leonardo very wisely remarks that that drawing is best which best expresses the passion that animates a figure; and as we have learnt anew through the courage of infinitely serious modern artists like Cezanne—a far more significant figure than any living painter east of Suez—the expression of dominant ideas may often demand an exaggeration or distortion of normal form. That this should be so is a psychological necessity, for every movement of the spirit has a corresponding physical gesture and for every emotion there must be set up a corresponding strain in the physical vehicle. Strains of this kind are not so simply to be

expressed as in merely muscular reaction. There are many drawings demonstrably "incorrect" which could not be "better drawn." That even teachers of art concur in this view is demonstrated by their respect for old masters; it is not commonly held that the paintings of Giotto or the Ajanta frescoes could be advantageously corrected. The theory of progress in art has long been exploded.

Let us turn in conclusion to quite another aspect of art, that of patronage. We may consider separately, although no hard and fast lines can be drawn, the patronage of the public in general, direct or indirect, and that of the rich or powerful individual such as a king or millionaire, or, if the days of such are to be regarded as numbered, that of the dominant individual to whom equality of opportunity has given the power that should rightly be his.

Under the most ideal conditions, the public does not exercise a choice about the sort of art it gets. A community with a living soul accepts the intuitions of that consciousness, as they are expressed by those who happen to be functioning artists, without demur. This is actually folk art, and the solid foundation of everything else. In the most fortunate periods, the taste of the folk and of persons in power is identical, a situation typically illustrated in mediaeval Europe and Hindu India. But for this there is needed not only a community of taste, but a living tradition; and for the inheritance of a tradition, there must be some kind of social equilibrium. Equally, for the maintenance of standards of craftsmanship, no less than for the finest quality of work in any other field, the artist must not be under the stern necessity of selling himself or his work to avoid starvation; he must not be subject to exploitation, nor bound to consult the taste of uncultivated individuals or audiences. Nor should there be any hard and fast line drawn between the artist and the artisan, art and industry. Under Oriental conditions, all these circumstances of security and status were provided for, either by the landed endowment of hereditary artists' families, a combination of agricultur-

al and aesthetic activity within the same family, the attachment of hereditary artists to religious foundations, the maintenance of royal workshops at every court, or the association of similarly functioning individuals in guilds or castes. In other words, a community pretending to cultivation and not merely preoccupied, as one finds to be the case in a city like this, with a merely barbaric struggle for existence, inevitably recognized its responsibility to artists, as to all other workmen, in some formal way, by according to them an inalienable status. The idea would not have occurred to anyone in the East to leave the artist to starve in time of war, on the ground that his activity is supposedly unpractical; in the case of conquest, the artists themselves might become a part of the spoils of war, but their status and activity would not be changed. Political disturbances in ancient times did not so much interfere with art as do the normal conditions of society now. In other words, whereas in industrial societies the artist occupies only the precarious position of a parasite, in Eastern countries, as in mediaeval Europe, he had a definite place in the social order.

Neither the existence of museums nor of individual rich collectors can be said to prove a love of art in modern society. Necessary as they may be, the very necessity for museums goes far to prove the absence of a genuine artistic activity in the community; for they exist to preserve such things as were once but common articles of commerce. The great museum cannot be regarded as a compensation for civic and sectional squalor. On the other hand, the great collector cannot be regarded as a patron of art, in many cases not even as a lover of art. In ages of genuine patronage, the powerful patron lent protection and support to living artists; and had this not been the case, those works which we now collect and preserve, and which command such extravagant prices, would never have come into existence. What counts is not the purchase of stray works of art by museums or collectors, but the opportunity provided for continuous and consistent work, having public rather than private application. The

artist responds to the demand—the more that is asked of him, the more he has to give. If he gives comparatively little today, it is because we are content with so little. To sum up what has been last said, a great part of the significance of Oriental art is to be read in the relation of art to life in Eastern societies.